

8 January 2004

KOSOVO: No peace for Orthodox Christmas

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

The Orthodox Christmas season this month has been marred in Kosovo by a series of violent incidents, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A church was broken into and several items and some money were stolen, and a bus was attacked by local Albanians at the Decani monastery after the Christmas service. The attack on the church follows an earlier attack in November 2003. Officials of the United Nations administration (UNMIK) have condemned the attacks, the latest in a series since 1999 for which no arrests have ever been made. Speaking to Forum 18 about the attack on the bus, Fr Sava Janjic of the Decani monastery described it as a "demonstration of utmost religious intolerance" on Christmas "a holiday of peace and forgiveness". "What a paradox, that the attack was made at a moment when the head of UNMIK, only a hundred metres away, was speaking with the local Decani assembly president and appealed to him to show tolerance and understanding towards Decani monastery."

During the night of 3/4 January, unknown perpetrators broke into the Church of St Peter and Paul in Gornja Brnjica (Bernica e Eperme in Albanian), near the provincial capital Pri tina. Several items and some money were stolen, while sacral vessels and vestments were thrown around. On 7 January, Orthodox Christmas, a bus with Russian humanitarian workers and journalists travelling from Decani monastery after the Christmas service was stoned by local Albanians. Officials of the United Nations interim administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) condemned these incidents.

"When we approached the church we noticed that someone tried to break in through the entrance metal door, but only damaged the lock," Fr Miroslav Popadic, parish priest in Pri tina, told Forum 18. "Someone cut the metal bars on a window, broke in, stole the money and some church items, and made a huge mess. Every single item that was movable was thrown away. It was a sad scene."

The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska and Prizren "most vehemently" condemned this latest desecration. "It appears that this case of attack on the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church is as unlikely to be resolved as any of the others."

The Church of Sts Peter and Paul in Gornja Brnjica was built in 1975 on the ruins of the medieval Church of St Nicholas, destroyed during the Ottoman occupation. The church is separated from the Serbian-populated village by a small wood, and is closer to an Albanian village. There are still 47 Serbian houses in Gornja Brnjica with 187 people. This church was attacked in late November (see F18News 1 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=200).

The 7 January stoning of a bus carrying 30 Russian humanitarian aid workers and journalists took place in the town of Decani in western Kosovo. The delegation of the Russian St Andrew Fund and the Russian-Serbian Friendship Society, which had arrived in Kosovo on 4 January, had just visited Decani monastery for the Orthodox Christmas service and were returning to Pri tina. Russian news agency Itar-Tass reported that "more than 300 Kosovar Albanians" threw stones at the bus. No injuries were reported. UNMIK police said three people threw stones, breaking one of the windows of the bus.

The Christmas liturgy at Decani monastery was also attended by the head of UNMIK, Harri Holkeri, who was accompanied by KFOR peacekeeping troops and UN police units. Earlier, Holkeri had sent a Christmas message to the Orthodox believers living in Kosovo, praising them for their "courage and perseverance", adding that UNMIK is "aware that the conditions under which many Kosovars live are still unacceptable". Later, Holkeri expressed "deep disappointment" over the stoning of the Russian pilgrims, a 7 January UNMIK press release reported.

Fr Sava Janjic, deputy abbot of the monastery, described the attack on the Russian pilgrims as a "demonstration of utmost religious intolerance". "On one of the most significant Christian holidays, a holiday of peace and forgiveness - Christmas - Albanians in Decani attacked the guests of Decani monastery, who only half an hour before thanked Mr Holkeri for his assistance in organising their escort through Kosovo and Metohija," he told Forum 18 from Decani monastery on 8 January. "What a paradox, that the attack was made at a moment when the head of UNMIK, only a hundred metres away, was speaking with the local Decani assembly president and appealed to him to show tolerance and understanding towards Decani monastery."

During the Christmas holiday, Kosovo was visited by Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle, who served liturgies in several churches and monasteries, including the monastery in Pe? (Peja).

For more background information, see Forum 18's latest religious

freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=137

A printer-friendly map of Kosovo (map title Serbia and Montenegro) is

available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=yugosl>

The map follows international legal usage in indicating the boundaries of territories. Kosovo is in international law part of Serbia & Montenegro, although administered by the UN.

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